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ABSTRACT

The Center of Excellence for Rural Special Education at Clemson University (South Carolina) has developed a field-based undergraduate preservice teacher training program. During the fall and spring semesters of their senior year, preservice teachers are matched with a mentor special education teacher for 2 weeks in a rural school district of the type in which they are likely to find employment. Differing markedly from areas near the university, these districts have poor health care, large African American populations, and high rates of poverty and at-risk factors for school failure. The preservice teachers stay in homes of community families, and through the implementation of a service learning project, identify community needs and incorporate them into a meaningful school curriculum. Much of the impact of schools in rural communities depends on the strength of the school-community connection, and service learning can strengthen the interaction between classroom and community. The four stages of service learning projects are discussed, as well as how service learning uses the rural community as a curriculum resource, provides students with an opportunity to participate in job development, addresses community social and welfare needs, helps adults realize that schooling is a lifelong activity, enhances intergenerational ties, and demonstrates that caring for others and the community are characteristics of responsible adults. Figures depict the integration of service learning into the IEP and service learning responses to community problems. (TD)

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SERVE TO LEARN: MAKING CONNECTIONS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The importance of field experiences in preservice teacher training has been emphasized by a number of researchers (Scruggs &Mastropieri, 1993). The Center of Excellence for Rural Special Education, at Clemson University, has developed an undergraduate program which is characterized by the extensive field-based nature of its preservice teacher training. The preservice teachers' senior year is a time of total immersion into the local school community. University classes are taught in local schools in the afternoon by special education faculty, while mornings are spent in special education classrooms. Preservice teachers are thereby provided the opportunity to immediately and directly apply in school classrooms knowledge gained during instruction. Formal instruction is given a "real world" (Evans, 1994) basis for application. Situation-specific problems found in real classrooms not only provide a basis for university class discussion, but also allow for a broadening of textbook examples. The program is based on the belief that instruction is more meaningful when placed in context and extended beyond the walls of the university (Guest, 1993).

Although this recontextualization of teacher training has taken place in rural counties surrounding Clemson University, some of the typical characteristics of a rural community, e.g., isolation, limited resources, sparsity of population, are offset by the influence of the university community. This prevents preservice teachers from experiencing not only the challenges of rural education but also the benefits of strong community ties and sense of context reported as present in rural schools (Stern, 1994). Further, over 90% of these preservice teachers obtain jobs in counties across the state which have a very different rural profile than the counties in which they are placed for their clinical experiences. The counties immediately surrounding Clemson University have the highest test scores and lowest at-risk factors in South Carolina. They also have the lowest percentage of minority populations (average 3% African-American and even lower among other minority groups) in the State. As a region, the Southern United States has the highest rural poverty rates in the nation and 95% of rural African-American children (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1991). Most rural counties in South Carolina fit the characteristic profile of poverty, poor health care, and high at-risk factors for school failure. These are the counties where special education teachers are in most demand and the counties where graduates of Clemson's program are most likely to find a teaching job. The two factors of first, little connection to the community outside of the context of the school building and second, the discrepancy in profiles of schools in which training takes place and schools where teaching jobs will be found places limitations on the provision of a context for preservice teachers which is truly meaningful and relevant. Both of these limitations have been addressed by extending beyond the walls of the University to reach out to communities which are geographically remote from institutions of higher education.

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During preservice teachers' senior year an opportunity is provided in the Fall and Spring semester to be matched with a mentor special education teacher for two weeks in a rural school district which more closely represents the type of community in which they are likely to find employment. The demographics of the county serving as a base for this experience strongly contrast with those of the counties surrounding the University. For example, 74% of the school age population is African-American compared with 3% in the typical clinical placement. This rural county also has high rates of failure on all standardized measures of school achievement, with 41.2% of children "not ready" for first grade and a failure rate of 53% on the exit exam from high school.

The focus of this preservice experience is to work with, and be a part of, the rural school's inextricable connection with the community. One way of facilitating this connection with the community is by working with local churches to identify host families for the preservice teachers. The distance of this county from campus precludes any commuting , therefore, during the time in the rural school district the preservice teachers stay in pairs in the homes of families within the community. This provides a social connection with the life of the community. This connection is further strengthened through the contributions of local businesses. These social/business ties help in the development of community awareness, a process which is integral to the planning and implementation of a service learning project. Through the implementation of a service learning project, preservice teachers identify community needs and analyze how these community needs can be used as the focus for a meaningful school curriculum.

Much of the impact of the school in rural communities is directly related to the strength of the school-community connection (Stern, 1994). Service learning provides a curriculum linkage and a teaching methodology that renews and strengthens the interaction between the classroom and the needs of the community and its members. Service learning is not a form of community volunteerism but a methodology that blends service and learning to achieve the academic outcomes as written in IEPs (Dunlap, Drew, Carter & Brandes, 1997). Figure 1 shows an example of a service learning academic outcomes plan which may be used to record the integration of service learning activities throughout the school curriculum.

Service learning projects have four stages; preparation, action, reflection, and celebration (Duckenfield & Wright, 1995). In the preparation stage, students identify and analyze community needs, select and plan the project, and receive instruction in academic skills necessary for successful project implementation. The Fall semester experience for the preservice teachers involves the facilitating of this phase of the project. Local businesses or agencies are targeted as sources for information or materials. In the action stage, students complete direct, indirect, and/or advocacy activities that are meaningful, community-based, and academic outcome oriented. In the reflection stage, students discuss, read, write, and think critically about their service experiences. In the celebration stage, students and the community jointly recognize the significance of the contributions of the service

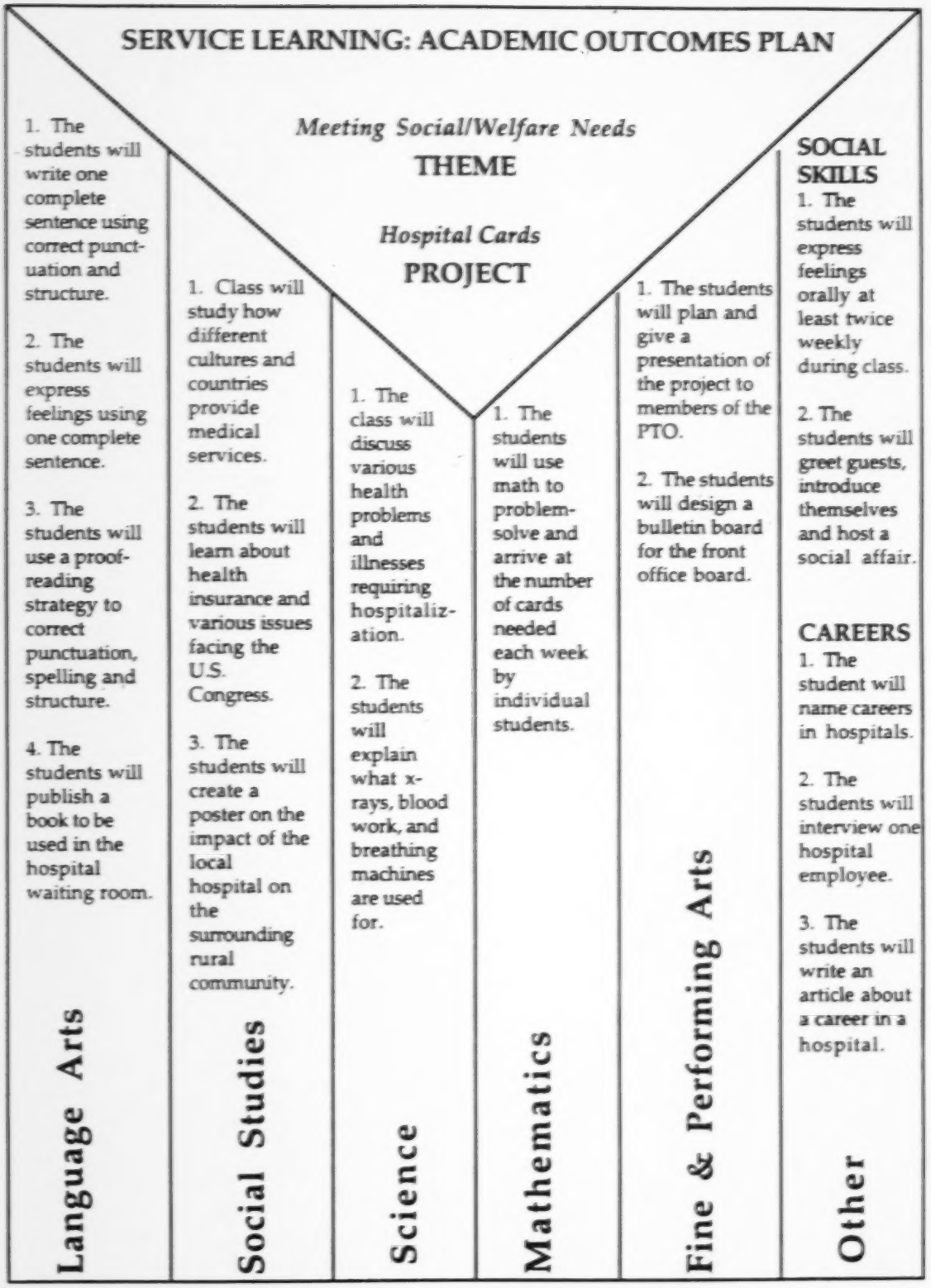
SERVICE LEARNING: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES PLAN
Meeting Social/Welfare Needs
THEME
Hospital Cards
PROJECT
Language Arts
1. The students will write one complete sentence using correct punctuation and structure.
2. The students will express feelings using one complete sentence.
3. The students will use a proof-reading strategy to correct punctuation, spelling and structure.
4. The students will publish a book to be used in the hospital waiting room.
Social Studies
1. Class will study how different cultures and countries provide medical services.
2. The students will learn about health insurance and various issues facing the U.S. Congress.
3. The students will create a poster on the impact of the local hospital on the surrounding rural community.
Science
1. The class will discuss various health problems and illnesses requiring hospitalization.
2. The students will explain what x-rays, blood work, and breathing machines are used for.
Mathematics
1. The students will use math to problem-solve and arrive at the number of cards needed each week by individual students.
Fine & Performing Arts
1. The students will plan and give a presentation of the project to members of the PTO.
2. The students will design a bulletin board for the front office board.
Other
SOCIAL SKILLS
1. The students will express feelings orally at least twice weekly during class.
2. The students will greet guests, introduce themselves and host a social affair.
CAREERS
1. The student will name careers in hospitals.
2. The students will interview one hospital employee.
3. The students will write an article about a career in a hospital.

FIG. 1: INTEGRATING SERVICE LEARNING INTO THE IEP

learning projects through special media coverage, assemblies, certificates, and social events. During each of these stages, the goal of all the activities is to empower the schools and the community by connecting academic skill attainment with community experience and by addressing rural community needs with meaningful action. Figure 2 lists the service learning projects developed and implemented by the preservice teachers which address many of the challenges for providing quality education in this rural school district.

CHALLENGES OF RURAL COMMUNITY	SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS
1. 27% parents without HS degree	1. GED single mom tutoring
2. 30% of families single working parent	2. Latchkey child safety program
3. Car accidents major cause of teenage mortality	3. Accident awareness program
4. 17% unemployment	4. Repair appliance business Recycling center Landscaping design business
5. 36% of families below poverty level	5. Soup kitchen Canned food drive
6. 36% of population over 65	6. Publishing oral stories
7. 41% dropout rate	7. School as an art center
8. 38% over 65 living below poverty level	8. Senior citizen mentoring
9. 41% not ready for 1st Grade	9. Early literacy project

FIG. 2: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

(Source: South Carolina Kids Count, 1996)

Service learning establishes a reciprocal relationship between the school the community (Cairn & Cairn, 1991). The preparation, action, reflection, and celebration of service learning projects connect the resources, the job development/ economic needs, the social/welfare needs, the intergenerational ties, and the life-long learning opportunities of the school and the community as illustrated in Figure 3.

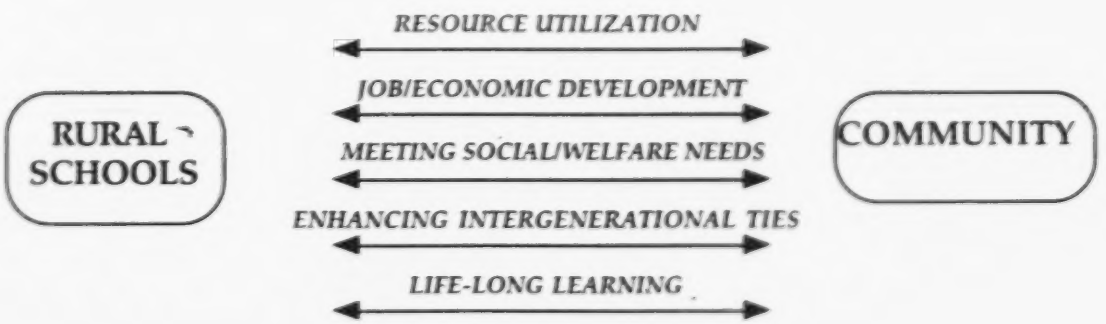

FIG. 3: SERVICE LEARNING: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Service learning creates a learning environment where the rural community serves as a curriculum resource. During the preparation phase of a service learning project involving recycling, the students spent time researching the services in the community that would support various kinds of recycling. They made personal and written contact with local businesses in order to secure such resources as transportation, storage, and reclaiming services for paper and metal goods. During the action phase of a service learning project involving a mentoring project with retired citizens, the students interacted with various community agencies providing services to the elderly and developed information packets for their adopted grandparents. The students connected with businesses that give senior discounts and recreational facilities that cater to senior programs in an effort to link older citizens to health and well-being resources. Service learning projects allow the rural community to be viewed as a resource rich environment rather than an environment of diminished services.

Service learning provides an opportunity for rural schools to participate in job development. Secondary students, surveying established businesses, discovered a lack of appliance repair services in the community. Implementing a small appliance repair project led to the development of marketable technical skills. Through handling money, opening bank accounts, and dealing with timely delivery of services, students began to understand the logistics of operating a business. Addressing the need for community recreational services led to the landscaping of an abandoned property and construction of a playground. Students increased their knowledge of mathematics and science and their awareness of how development of new jobs would contribute to the economic well-being of a depressed employment market.

Service learning increases the integration of academic curriculum and community action in such a way that social and welfare needs of communities are addressed. During the reflection stage of a service learning project that implemented a soup kitchen at the school for needy citizens, students developed a sense of ownership for community poverty issues. Secondary students, focusing on meeting the needs of a large percentage of children who are home alone after school, presented a safety assembly program in elementary schools and established a buddy system for these latchkey children. Realizing that the major cause of death among teens was car accidents, middle schoolers advocated for changes in driving laws, for increased training in accident prevention, for safe driver recognition systems, and for safer intersection design and construction. During these projects, students began to answer these questions: What is my value in this community?; What would I change about my community if I were in charge?; and How are the issues of poverty and child welfare in our community impacted by what is going on at the State level? The act of reflection through journal writing and group brainstorming develops a sense of personal connectedness between youth and the social issues of their rural community.

Service learning projects challenge the adults in the community to connect with the reality of schooling as a life-long activity. During the celebration phase of a service learning project centered on students tutoring single mothers for the GED, the mothers reported feeling that they finally viewed the school as a safe, caring environment. Students researching local musicians and their contributions to various types of music developed music learning centers in the school library and invited these musicians to share at these centers. Connecting community members to the school as a center for life-long learning has the potential to raise the functional literacy level of the entire rural community.

Service learning establishes opportunities for enhancing intergenerational ties in a time when many rural communities are losing these links because of movement out of the community by youth. Students who transcribed oral stories from elderly adults and celebrated by inviting these adults to school to share in the translation of these oral traditions into preserved stories established a forum for intergenerational sharing. These students gained new perspectives of their cultural heritage and were motivated to improve their writing and reading skills so that they could connect themselves with this heritage. During the action phase of assisting the local Meals on Wheels delivery to elderly shut-ins, a group of middle school students discovered the needs of this population to be far greater than nutritional and expanded their project to include visitations, cards, and assistance with household maintenance. Service learning shortened the geographical distances of the rural community and diffused the sense of isolation by bringing the young and old together.

The preservice teachers at Clemson University modeled through the development and implementation of service learning projects in a rural community that caring for others and the community are characteristics of responsible adults. Providing training for preservice teachers within this unique rural context exemplified curriculum that was relevant, motivating and purposeful. Several studies of long term effects of school-community projects (O'Connell, 1983; Middleton, 1993) show that the adult life patterns of those who participated in service learning projects exhibit increased involvement in community activities and a greater sense of ownership for local issues. The immediate impact of this contextualized training has been captured in these reflections recorded by the preservice teachers; "I learned that to build a successful curriculum, teachers must focus on the needs of the area in which they are teaching." and "It's one thing to watch a movie about another culture, and it's another thing to experience this culture. Movies might lead to awareness but experience leads to understanding. In the rural setting, you need to bring the world to your students!".

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